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Véronique Tadjo (France/South Africa)

Writing and Its Mis/Fortunes: How I write Where I Write

When I first started to write it was very much out of a vacuum; not in the sense that I wasn't aware of any literary tradition; on the contrary, I read a lot of poetry mainly from France and Africa. Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Prévert were my favorites. But I also read the poets of the Négritude movement with passion. Their blend of political commitment and lyricism won me over. It was a literature born mainly in Paris during the 1930's and created by writers and poets who were living there to further their studies. The big names were Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, Aimé Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and Frantz Fanon. They were all from the French West Indies but with strong links with Africa. There were also, Birago Diop from Senegal, Bernard Dadié from Côte d'Ivoire and Jacques Rabemanjara from Madagascar; and I think I read them all.

I learned subsequently that the movement had been influenced by the Harlem Renaissance through the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, among others. It was the inspiration they needed to shape their own literary movement, whose aim was to affirm their African identity and to protest against colonial oppression.

Incidentally, this is probably why, years later, I decided to study African American literature and culture. When I realized what was behind the poetry of the Négritude movement, it expanded my readings.

By the 1940's and the 1950's, Négritude had become the revolutionary literary weapon behind the fight for independence. Their mouthpiece was the literary review *Présence Africaine*. The movement drew support from leftist French intellectuals like André Breton, and Jean-Paul Sartre, who famously wrote the preface to Senghor's *Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry*, thus helping to put the Négritude movement on the map.

My early readings influenced me profoundly, and I have always tried in my writing to retain this element of political commitment while making sure that I did not lose the literary dimension which has to come first.

There is a whole school of criticism that says that one shouldn't write "committed" literature anymore, that it is outdated, boring and wooden. But considering what is happening on the African continent and the many conflicts that wreck our lives, I cannot subscribe to this. I turn to my old masters for inspiration, hoping that it is possible to go for a new form of commitment which, today, I call a "sense of responsibility."

I was also very much influenced by our oral literary tradition (poetry, songs, dirges, myths and legends, proverbs and philosophical thoughts). When I was growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, the tradition was all still very much alive.

So when I say that I was writing in a vacuum, I am talking about my own writing. It had no past. I had not written anything before and was therefore not weighed down by anything. After, *Laterite*, my first collection of poems, I continued to write, venturing into prose without ever really becoming a "novelist," as it is usually defined. I see my writing more as "texts" ("récits" in French, that is to say, pieces of writing whose genre is not defined). But with each work came an increasing awareness of

social responsibility and of my role as a writer in the highly troubled environment in which I was living, be it Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria or Kenya.

The turning point came with the project with which I became involved, *Rwanda, Writing as a Duty to Memory* (*Rwanda: Écrire par Devoir de Mémoire*). This is the name of an initiative that took ten writers from across Africa to Rwanda in 1998, four years after the genocide that took place there.

The objective of the project was to write an imaginative response to the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. What our books have in common is that each of them is by a writer from a different African country: Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Chad, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Rwanda, etc. Here again, the aim was to create a public sphere that would transcend national boundaries and work to free itself from the Western dominated mass media which had covered the Rwandan genocide extensively. All along, either because of the information world order or because of our inadequacies, the voices of Africans on the tragedy had hardly been heard.

We also thought that it was important to create a Pan-African public awareness of our own human rights abuses. We needed to talk to one another and to the outside world, in our own voices, about what had happened.

However, if we all said, "Yes," to Nocky Djedanoum, the initiator of the project, it wasn't without some apprehension. As far as I was concerned, I was worried about the fact that we were going as a group. Furthermore, I was wary of the potential danger of identifying too strongly with the Tutsi-led government that came to power in Rwanda after the genocide. Were we going to be free to write whatever we wanted to?

As it turned out, my fears were unfounded. Everybody's book was different, some choosing to write poetry or even drama. We did not speak with one voice. I was able to go to Kigali in my chosen time, and nobody ever tried to influence the content of my work in one way or another. Well, maybe it is not entirely true. I remember that during my second trip, when I had decided that I needed to go to a prison and to attend the court proceedings for a prisoner accused of being involved in the genocide, I almost failed to get permission to do any of it. It was only thanks to the determination of a man who worked within the prison system on a rehabilitation project that I was able to meet with some prisoners and then go to a tribunal.

When I talk about my book on Rwanda, I always stress the fact that I wrote it as an outsider, not as a witness or victim of genocide. In fact, I had no particular link with the country prior to those two trips. But for me, if I want to do my job as a writer, an *intellectual*, and as a citizen of the world, I cannot confine myself to the borders of my national identity. I must open my eyes to the world around me, to this globalized place in which our destinies are increasingly intertwined.

Unfortunately, not everybody sees it like this. Being the bearer of bad news is not always easy, and carries some serious drawbacks. Most people are afraid of knowing the truth about traumatic events. They don't wish to be shaken from their sense of security, especially if the issue is no longer in the news.

Depending on where you find yourself, the atmosphere can change dramatically. When the German translation of *The Shadow of Imana* came out and I was invited to do some readings, there was always a palpable tension in the audience. I was fully aware that, for a lot of them, it was an indirect

reminder of the holocaust. Suddenly, the whole feeling of guilt associated with the Nazi past must have weighed more heavily on their shoulders.

I really feel for young people today. They are living in a world that is violent and full of natural and man-made disasters: global warming, the Tsunami, Katrina, 9/11, nuclear proliferation, conflicts and AIDS. What sort of a life is it?

My eldest son who is sixteen years old is fascinated by space and the conquest of it. I was puzzled for a long time by his passion. But then one day, it suddenly dawned on me: he was looking for a way out. He had his eyes set on a world that still held countless promises. As his mother, I would have preferred to know that he likes being on this earth and that he cares for it.

But I have the misfortune of being a writer, a strange creature whose work is to stir up trouble, ask difficult questions and give no real answers.

During my last visit to Côte d'Ivoire, I gave a series of interviews because *L'ombre d'Imana* was published thanks to a co-edition in eight African countries at the same time. A journalist asked me: "Why did you write about the Rwandan genocide and why do you keep talking about it when our own country is at war? Why don't you write about what is happening here?" I was vexed by the question. As a matter of fact, I was in the middle of writing *Reine Pokou*, which deals with the rereading of an Ivorian legend in the light of contemporary events. But I did not tell him this. I needed to clarify one thing first: he had not understood the motivation behind the Rwanda book: *I was writing for my country*. I did not want such a thing to happen to us, too. It is a misfortune to be misunderstood to such an extent.

And there are still other misfortunes associated with a difficult subject. Political situations change. The world evolves constantly and new allegiances are born every day. Economic interests come into play, significantly changing the power relationships. Yet, some people think, for instance, that I have to be taken into account for what is happening in Rwanda *now*.

I have to answer to the present government's political stance and it is also assumed that I have become a specialist on the Rwandan question, past, present and future.

I long for the day when I'll be able to write about good news only—even though hope is always the main ingredient in my writing. But you know what I mean, real good news.

I just long for the day when I'll be able to say to my two sons: "Don't worry. Things are going to be all right, I promise."